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# Your Bottom Line

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## Keep your distance

One of the most fundamental and costly errors a professional photographer can make is to become too closely associated with the product he produces. Every photographer is at least part artist and, as such, naturally takes a great deal of pride and self-satisfaction in his work. However, this can interfere with his ability to operate a studio as a true business enterprise, and not just as a hobby.

When performing photographic services as a hobby, photographers can pretty much do what they want. But, if the bottom line is profit, then the entire operation must be run as a business. It is all too easy to appear overly confident about one's own work and that can easily interfere with business success.

One of the most important aspects of the photography business is how you present yourself to clients. Most photographers like to do it all. They single-handedly deal with every step of the sales process—from talking to prospects on the telephone, to making the photographs, and collecting payment for their services. Of course, if they are just starting out, there may be no other choice. But, too often, when it is possible to hire employees, photographers assign support staff to the wrong duties: sorting negatives, numbering proofs, or assembling albums and frames. This theoretically gives the photographer more time to do what he does best: deal with clients.

Is this really the best use of your additional manpower? Perhaps not. It is possible that your operation could be far more successful if, when not photographing, you sort negatives and let your new employee (after proper training, of course) deal with the customers.

The main advantage to keeping a strategic distance from your customers is that the designated representative can play a very different role than the photographer can. He or she can say things that might be viewed as "unacceptable" if they came from the photographer. For example, a prospective customer calls on the phone to ask about the price of a wedding album. Most photographers have learned that, in

order to sell clients on the value of their services, they must promote the quality of the product and de-emphasize the price. But, that is difficult for photographers to do.

Imagine the potential customer's response when the photographer, acting as his or her own sales agent, says, "Have you seen my wonderful wedding photography? I am the very best in the area. In fact, I am one of the best photographers in the country. I win lots of awards. I have lots of people demanding my services. You are going to love me. I'm so good that what I charge is of no consideration."

This type of response, which is not atypical, immediately turns off many prospects. On the other hand, imagine how different it would be if the receptionist says, "Have you ever seen the type of work that is done by our photographer(s)? You haven't? You are in for a real surprise. Before I worked here, I thought all photo studios were about the same, but, boy, was I wrong.

"ABC Studios takes a totally different approach to wedding photography," she would continue. "They don't just stamp out photos like they are coming from a machine. Our photographers have won some of the most important national awards in wedding photography. We have photographed hundreds of weddings. In fact, most of our new assignments come from referrals made by satisfied customers. Can I invite you to come into our studio so I can personally show you why I enjoy working here so much? You are going to love our wedding stories. And, I can't wait to show you our new selection of albums."

Now, it is no longer the egotistical photographer bragging about his work. It's a well-spoken representative, and it is much more acceptable for him or her to brag about the studio's work and photographic accomplishments.

When the customer comes in for an appointment to view the work and discuss pricing, again, it should not be the photographer that does the selling. It is more appropriate for the receptionist or sales coordinator to talk about the studio's virtues. The photographer can simply make an "appearance."

The sales associate might say, "Oh, I'd like you to meet our chief photographer, the one I've been telling you so much about." Then, turning to the photographer, the associate would introduce the couple and say, "They are getting married in June and I've been telling them about our services." After a short dialogue, the photographer can excuse himself and return to other matters. At an appropriate time, the sales associate may want to call the photographer back into the conversation to discuss any special considerations. However, the sales associate should take careful notes regarding the customer's wishes.

Every step in this process should be conducted with the utmost professionalism. After all, you are probably not the cheapest photographer in town and you want your services to be worth the cost difference.

After the wedding, when the previews are ready, the sales associate should be the one to deal with clients, because they may be afraid to speak honestly in front of the photographer for fear of insulting him. However, a brief appearance by the photographer might be in order.

The same scenario should be used when the customer picks up the order. Of course, the photographer should definitely take time to thank customers and wish them well.

Professional photographers can learn a great deal about marketing their services and products simply by watching others. Does your doctor answer his own phone and brag about his surgery? Are doctors usually involved in collecting a patient's basic information? Or in collecting the fees? How do successful artists sell their work? Many highly acclaimed artists never even meet with the public. They place their work in the hands of a representative who sells both the artist and the work.

Keeping a distance from your own work may be one of the most difficult things to do. While you want to be sure it gets the attention it deserves, letting someone else sing its praises will increase your bottom line. 